

## JOSEPH BATHANTI

### *A Conversation with Ron Bayes*

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*Ronald H. Bayes is Distinguished Professor of Literature and Creative Writing and Writer-in-Residence at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina. He is the Founding Editor of St. Andrews Press and the St. Andrews Review, which will this year celebrate its 20th anniversary. Bayes was born in Oregon in 1932, where he received BA. and MA. degrees from, and later taught at Eastern Oregon State College. He has also studied at the University of Pennsylvania as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, at the University of British Columbia, and at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. From 1956 to 1958, he was stationed in Iceland as a member of a United States Infantry combat team, and has on three occasions lived in Japan.*

*Bayes is the author of fourteen volumes of poetry, among which are Cages and Journeys, Child Outside My Window, Constructions in English and Japanese, Dust and Desire, History of the Turtle I-IV, The Casketmaker, King of August, Fram and A Beast in View, which was nominated for The Pulitzer Prize in 1985. He is also the author of a monograph of literary criticism, John Reed and The Limits of Idealism, as well as two works for the stage, An Evening With Ezra Pound and An Evening With William Carlos Williams.*

*Bayes served as Master Poet-in-Residence at The Atlantic Center for The Arts in 1986, was one of three American poets invited to read at The Noto Festival in Tokyo, Japan in the summer of 1987, was in that same year recipient of a N.C. Arts Council Fellowship for creative writing, and has recorded his poetry for the Widener Library at Harvard University. The National Poetry Foundation is at work on plans to issue his Collected Poems.*

*The following interview with Bayes was conducted over the course of a mid-October weekend at my home in McDowell County while the poet was on one of his rare visits to the N.C. mountains.*

**I've heard you say on more than one occasion that writing a poem is a political act. How and why?**

It's perfectly obvious. It's a political act because man is a political animal. To do *anything* is a political act. When you're kind enough to open a door for me, that's a political act. That might be unctuous if I didn't have a load of books in my arms.

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Although you're decidedly a North Carolinian and have lived in this state for nearly 21 years, you are Oregonian by birth. Is there a tension between these two extremes in your poems?

To tell the truth, I don't pay any attention to that. Lawson Inada—a person I met only once and who is one of the nicest Oregonians I can think of, and one of the most significant Neisei [U.S.-born Japanese] writers in the country—when asked in an interview if he considered himself a Northern or Southern writer, responded, "North of what?" I think human beings deal with human beings. People who've been much maligned—like Somerset Maugham, Rudyard Kipling and Oscar Wilde—are much closer to human than the creeps who've run the literary establishment for the last hundred years. Well, let's be generous and say seventy years.

Your poetry keeps sacred the concept of the muse, an energy upon which you rely and which you intone. Could you talk about your attachment to that concept?

Of course magic exists. I think it's different to different people at different times. Different energy fields—all that stuff. I don't want to controvert the scientists before they have a chance to attack me. I was thinking about that this afternoon. In fact, when we were coming here we had been talking about the fact that I wasn't excited by my *Collected Poems* coming out, if they do. The idea is very nice. I was thinking about the dedication. The dedication of my last book was, "To the friends, then and now." The dedication to the *Collected Poems*, if it comes out, will be, "To the Lady whom the destroyer never destroys and to the friends, then and now." I believe in people from other lives and times being just as potent as, and often more potent than, the people that we have daily dealings with. I think that the benign aspect of this is greatly ignored, but I absolutely believe in things like guardian angels, The Muse. I'm getting to the point—and I used to apologize for it—where I want to put it up front. I don't think we can survive without these *Realities*. Capital R. Italicized.

The reputation of St. Andrews College for writing and writers is something of a phenomenon. The magazine, *St. Andrews Review*, and the St. Andrews Press, both of which you founded, have survived 20 years when larger, more established, better bankrolled operations in more geographically advantageous locations have gone under. I know of no other college that has had ongoing for 20 years without interruption a weekly reading series which one week might feature Carolyn Kizer or

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**James Dickey, and the next a city policeman or a college freshman away from home for the first time and taking his or her first crack at writing poems. How has this tradition endured?**

Well, I think Ezra Pound is the answer to the whole thing. The idea of the live tradition in poetry, which he dealt with in circumstances unique to himself—St. Andrews is one of the few places that have paid attention to that. My involvement with this type of thing began at a small college in Oregon (Eastern Oregon State College) many years ago. Kenneth Patchen was sick and didn't have any insurance, and a letter went out to all sorts of writers all around the country. The purpose was to try and get some money for Patchen's back surgery. I was at the time in Oregon and said to myself, "Whatever we can do." I said to two or three students, "Let's try something." So we held a poetry reading and charged two bits apiece and we earned 20 dollars when we thought we'd be lucky if we earned 10. That's why I'm a populist, and I find it very strange to be teaching at a private college. We ended up with, at the max, 500 people at a reading once upon a time in La Grande, Oregon. The college was about the same size as St. Andrews—about 1,200 in a community of about 13,000. So that's where I got my teeth into the idea of "this is what's going on." It needs to go on. I relate it back to Pound's dictum of the live tradition: "Hear thunder, seek to include." That's the whole thing.

**As an adjunct to the last question, and in light of the dogged hold on existence which the literary tradition at St. Andrews has had, its reputation has still remained relatively obscure. Only in the past year or so has it received the kind of publicity that it has for so long richly deserved.**

Well, let me get back to Oregon and politics and stuff like that and relate it to the *St. Andrews Review*. Because if the *Review* relates to ourselves, then the political is a terribly important part of it—the idea that to act on something you think is important is crucial. And you learn this very early on. When I was a kid in Oregon, Eisenhower was running for president and wanted to lower the voting age to 18. Truman wanted to raise it to 25. We had farm kids running around on truck beds saying, "Vote for Ike." This to me is very important. How did I acclimate to the South? Well, obviously I haven't, in that sense. In Oregon we had free license and elbow room, and we could run around with bullhorns asking the cows to vote. We invited Communist Party leader Gus Hall to the campus of Eastern Oregon State College because the Young Democrats couldn't, because the right-wing Republicans were attacking everything they did. So the Young Republicans

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invited Hall to speak. To me that's what it's all about. That's what poetry's all about: action. It's kind of a cross between a grange meeting and a seminar.

Your relationship with Japan and Japanese writers goes back many years. You were friends with the Japanese visionary writer Yukio Mishima, and you continue to closely correspond with his widow, Yoko Mishima. St. Andrews Press has recently published a volume of poems by Hiroaki Sato and a volume by Soichi Furuta is forthcoming. The *St. Andrews Review* has for years been on the cutting edge of publishing Japanese poetry in translation. Donald Keane, Professor of Japanese Literature at Columbia University, has said that he knows "no one in America who has been more energetic and effective in that endeavor of introducing Japanese literature to the general American public" than you. What about your romance with Japan and its literature?

I'd love nothing more than to address that. Nothing probably more confuses people. I think the problem is that it's particularly difficult on one level and absolutely innocent and simple on another. Let me take the reverse. I believe that people do understand each other a great deal. I think when you get down to it, the jingos always liked to say—the Kipling thing—that "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." But the important line in that ballad of Kipling's is, "Till two strong men meet face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth." I think that line—though understandably—has gotten lost a great deal. I think it's nothing strange that the two people I most admire in the literary world are T.S. Eliot and Yukio Mishima. And by the same token I feel guilt-ridden at not mentioning Ezra Pound, because he is one who's exemplified standing forward. If there is a person I had to be like, I would want to be like Ezra, because he fought the fight. But the whole thing is to break down this great big concrete wall of stupidity that can't listen. Life is good, work is necessary, responsibility is an absolute, and love is the only thing that sweetens it. Let's go on. When this dude at Mishima's funeral said that he was the greatest man since Jesus Christ, I said, "Wow! Maybe."

**Do you feel up to talking about Mishima?**

Well, I believe in the muse, and I invest in that. Ask me.

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**Probably like a lot of people, the first thing I read of Mishima's was "Patriotism," and I was of course, for so many reasons, overwhelmed by it. Then I read *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*.**

Did you see that horrible movie (*The Sailor Who Fell from Grace...*)? The mercantile establishment has warped Mishima.

**When I read the Mishima biography and found that he was actually foreshadowing his own death in "Patriotism," I was completely knocked out. That kind of commitment, that kind of belief!**

That kind of sense of humor! Everyone wants to make him deadly serious. We're all going to die.

**What was he like?**

What was he like? You got enough tape? This is going to be about a 20-minute monolog. It all gets back to the Great Chain of Being. It all grew out of Ezra Pound, of course. I don't believe in invasion of privacy. And when I went to Japan in the mid '60s to teach for a year with the University of Maryland overseas program, I really was as close to a vacuum as anyone could be. Suicide wasn't quite that important, and this seemed like a better option than anything that had been going on in my life for an awful long time. So I look every sou out of my pocket and went off to Ireland to spend the summer school at Trinity College, which seemed better than walking in front of a train that might not arrive on time and end up embarrassing everyone. But in the meantime, back at the ranch, I was in New York, and I met (New Directions publisher) James Laughlin, who'd been such a wonderful friend over the years through correspondence, and he said. "You're going to Japan?" I said, "Yes." He told me that he had just published three Japanese writers, and gave me their books to take along. That was the first time I had encountered Mishima. So I went on and spent the summer in Ireland and didn't commit suicide. I came back to Washington, where I got a military flight to my teaching assignment in Japan. But I wasn't about to write to Mr. Mishima. So I wrote to Laughlin back in New York and asked him to send me Mishima's phone number and address and a letter of introduction. Mishima was noted for his parties. The response I got was an invitation to a party at his house. Then my orders came through that I was to be in Okinawa teaching at a certain time, and that completely cut out the chance to answer his invitation. As a Westerner, I had studiously tried to set it up so as not to offend anyone. So I went to Okinawa. I was terribly upset.

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I bought a fifth of Jack Daniels Black, retired to my hotel room and read *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*, which I thought was stunning. I also felt equally sorry for myself at not being able to meet the great man at the time.

I identified with Mishima because he identified both with the underprivileged and the power structure—the need to have help for everybody. That's why he killed himself. We were both interested in blood and night and death.

**Why mention those three things?**

Because that is what he was interested in. Wasn't Jesus?

**You mention blood and Jesus in the same breath. I think of the sacrificial and the Eucharistic. Do you think Mishima's suicide was ordained?**

I think it was carefully planned.

**Mishima, at least from my reading, seems like one of those terribly charismatic people that we are occasionally privileged to meet.**

What can I say? He was the only person I would ever have died for. Of course, after his death they tried to make him into a fascist. But he was exactly what I think one should be in a terribly impossible situation, and that is one who looks with passion and anger at excess. Nobody cared more about the lower class, the economically deprived, the culturally deprived, the educationally deprived. He was absolutely outraged at excess and the privilege of class.

**Why is Mishima now a non-person in Japan?**

I have only heard that he is a non-person in Japan. In an interview I did with Kobo Abe in 1970, he was wincing under the world's accusation that the Japanese are "economic animals." He was ashamed by it. You know his writing, and by God it's scary. When Kobo was here six or seven years ago, he said that Mishima was one of his best friends, which startled me. But it gets me back to the fact that people who have a genuine concern are terribly upset by the business of being bought and sold. I think Mishima's great message—or one of his great messages—was that we've got to honor the beautiful, that which is attained by hard work, long labor, and celebration. When Mishima said, "Too much chrysanthemum, not enough sword," I

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think that's one of the things he was addressing. Shortly before he killed himself he said, "There is no Japan left." The irony of it is that at this point it's up to America, by God, to allow the beauty of Japan to come back.

**Let's get back to Pound, since you've used him as a springboard to talk about everything from politics to the live tradition to Mishima.**

Well, I have made one major change in my thinking in a year. I don't think it will affect my writing, because I think the fact that action is important has always been implicit in my writing. I remember going to see Antonioni's movie, *Blow-up*, in Tokyo. I was so offended by it that I was still outraged the next day when I went to dinner with Mishima. I remember saying that although Sartre was a communist and I considered myself a conservative in the larger picture—although I'm a liberal Republican, but "the L word" has been so distorted that we may as well say "conservative" in context—that I admired Sartre very much. The message I got from Sartre, despite his being a very rigid communist, was that any action was better than no action. I very much believed that, and Mishima agreed. He was often accused of being an extreme right-winger, which I never quite understood. I think he was just an idealist, and the wings didn't matter. But anyhow, that action factor comes back to Pound. I am on record somewhere as saying that the biggest tension I felt could be related to my affection for Pound and my affection for Auden; they were obviously oil and water as far as action was concerned. In that wonderful poem of Auden's, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," he states that "poetry makes nothing happen." On the other hand, Pound's whole life is posited on poetry as a vehicle for making things happen. Those two polarities were there for me, and I felt sort of strung out between them. It has been, as a matter of fact, within the past twelve months that I have in fact resolved that to my satisfaction. Pound was right. I could not cope with the conception that "poetry makes nothing happen." It does. It must. It has to, whether on an intimate private level or on a wider political level.

**Pound continues to be elusive as a man and as a poet. What about the ever-burning question of his sanity?**

The most wonderful response to that is made by Theodore Roethke in one of his poems, when he says, "What is madness but nobility of soul at odds with circumstance?" Was it Wordsworth who worries about poets dying in "misery and madness?" That's a paraphrase. Age and decrepitude and madness are everyone's concerns. It's just that poets think more about those things, and they write it down. I think Pound was a noble person "at

odds with circumstance." He may have been very wrong about some things. Who isn't? As James Laughlin says, also, "Yeah, he was crazy." But I would add, parenthetically, who isn't from time to time? Who wouldn't be crazy after being locked up in a metal gorilla cage with a concrete floor in the middle of nowhere with people forbidden to speak to him?

It was a time of madness. Pound had been denied the right to leave Italy. He tried to get to Switzerland, but he was turned back at the border. And we'll never know if he was turned back because some of Franklin Roosevelt's bureaucrats thought they might ingratiate themselves with the administration because of Pound having been so verbally, violently anti-Roosevelt; or whether it was just one of those bureaucratic glitches. And that probably had a good deal to do, too, with the subsequent vituperation against Roosevelt in the infamous radio broadcasts from Rome.

We sit here literally in the shadow of Black Mountain. Largely because of you, I suspect, St. Andrews College has had a rather unique and singular relationship with the legacy of Black Mountain College. Jonathan Williams, Joel Oppenheimer, Robert Creeley, Bucky Fuller, Merce Cunningham and John Cage, among other Black Mountaineers, have appeared at St. Andrews over the years. How has the tradition of Black Mountain infiltrated St. Andrews? And would you please talk a little about your relationship with the Black Mountain poets, particularly Charles Olson?

Well, we had had the Writers' Forum going for some years at St. Andrews. Whitney Jones was the chairman of the English department in the early 70s, and he and I were simpatico. So, in addition to what Whitney saw had been able to take root in the Writers' Forum, he used that as a springboard in his own very fecund imagination and plotted a Black Mountain College Festival for the spring of 1974. He sensed exactly what you described. He applied for grants, and with the money we received we were able to go ahead with the festival, which Whitney chaired. Bucky Fuller had been the mentor of a close friend of mine, Jack Wilkinson. I think it was later that Tom Patterson, who was then a student at St. Andrews, became great friends with John Cage. But somehow it all came about.

Somebody teasingly referred to me as a "visionary mystic" about 20 years ago. I like the idea. I do believe in the mystical, and I do believe in convergences. I have always considered myself a muse poet. I've always considered that things are an ongoingness. What does the Bible say? "There's nothing new under the sun." Olson used to like to quote Alfred North White-



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head, or whoever it was, about that business of, if you draw a straight line long enough, it makes a circle. So I've always considered myself a conduit. I know a lot of other writers and artists consider themselves original. Well, let's not get into expletives, but I think that is a mistaken idea. So I consider myself a conduit. I feel that way about the Black Mountain movement. I feel that way about Pound. And I feel that way about Mishima as well as my relationship with Mrs. Mishima and the whole importance of his work.

It all began, rather strangely, out in Oregon. It began with the Patchen benefit that I mentioned earlier, which drew 40 people when we thought we'd be lucky if 10 showed up; and I said to myself, "This is too good to let die." So we started having them once a week, just like we do at St. Andrews. We'd mix poetry, jazz, and an art opening, and that was the live tradition, which is what Pound did at Rapallo in a much more sophisticated sense. At any rate, my division chairman in Oregon came across the fact that there was such a thing as the Patterson Foundation, which would 50-per-cent fund a visiting poet. So we got a grant and invited Philip Whalen, who is considered as one of the Black Mountain poets. And Philip was splendid. We had a marvelous time, and Philip and I became great good friends. He was never a mercenary person; he's now a Zen priest. But Philip later wrote to me from San Francisco about this gathering of the Black Mountain clan. I think it was in 1963 when Robert Creeley was teaching up in Vancouver, and he and Warren Tallman had put together a reunion of the Black Mountain people. It was not advertised at all. It was word of mouth and friend-to-friend. Philip suggested I go. As it turned out, Philip didn't have any money to go himself. So Allen Ginsberg and Creeley got advances on their first paychecks to fly Philip up from San Francisco to Vancouver so he could be part of it. I ended up going, and that's where my Black Mountain thing really took wing. I had known and liked Philip's work. I really didn't understand Creeley at the time—I didn't know how to read him I didn't know how to hear him. I hadn't encountered Robert Duncan or Olson. So those were three fabulous weeks. There I was. I was one of the squares, one of the non-knowledgeable. I certainly couldn't have been accused of being a groupie. But I was immediately attracted, in particular, to Olson and Creeley. I had of course known Whalen. Ginsberg was there. He was so surrounded by groupies at the time that I didn't get to know him. But we've subsequently met many times and have gotten to know each other somewhat. Anyway, it was a scintillating time. It was a religious experience, in a sense. I did get to know Olson very well, which surprised the heck out of me, because he was in demand, even though he wasn't surrounded; and

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I've always been fairly reticent under such circumstances, not wanting to intrude myself.

We were at the farewell party given at a little cottage by Fred Wah and his wife. It was raging on as fabulous parties should, and Olson and I somehow ended up out on the back porch, where we fell into an extended conversation, at which time he told me the story that I have not seen in print—the story of his last day in Yucatan, when he was there on his Guggenheim fellowship. He said that this old Mayan priest came out of the jungle and approached him on the tarmac, where he was piddling around prior to boarding a plane to come back to the U.S.

Olson had mastered some Mayan by then. The priest spoke no Spanish or English, but Olson understood him. The priest turned out to be from a tribe that was so far out in the bush that there were some questions as to whether they existed. They simply weren't in contact with civilization. The priest was carrying something in a piece of burlap, which he presented to Olson as a gift. Olson unwrapped it, and there was a human thigh bone with Mayan glyphs carved into it. The priest explained that this bone had been worshiped by his people since prehistory as the thigh-bone of Quetzalcoatl or Kukulcan, the Mayan culture hero. He further explained that he had had a vision that a great white man would be in the Yucatan and would be leaving at a certain time, and that this central object of worship of his tribe should be given to the white man because he was the reincarnation of Quetzalcoatl. And so the little old priest had called together the tribal elders and told them about his vision, and they deliberated long and extensively, then decided to give up their central object of worship to the priest so that he could go and deliver it to the great white man, who happened to be Charles Olson. I understand that this thigh bone exists in the Olson Archives at the University of Connecticut. My friend George Butterick is the archivist up there. I haven't contacted him on that specific topic, but that Black Mountain Festival at St. Andrews in '74 was attended by Ed Dom, who of course was one of the Black Mountain poets. So I brought up this story of the thigh bone to him, and Ed—who is a wicked wit, a very sardonic wit—said, "Oh, yeah, that old thigh bone. Olson used to keep that thing in a tin can on top of his refrigerator in Gloucester."

**You mentioned earlier that not only did you not know how to read Creeley, but you didn't know how to hear him. This seems to be one of the central dilemmas for anyone approaching poetry, especially for the first time.**

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Well, in my classes I use a film that students at San Francisco State College made of Theodore Roethke when he was there on an exchange professorship from the University of Washington. Ted died that summer of a heart attack while swimming, at age 55, I think it was. It's a fantastically nice film because of the amateurish nature of it, made out of love, some expertise, but not slick. Roethke says on there that teaching begins when there is reciprocity, when the teacher starts learning from the student. It can't always happen, but sometimes even in a huge class it asserts itself for everybody's good. My students brought me to Creeley, and I didn't understand him. And then suddenly it was just one of those things, a little bit cosmic. You try so hard, and then you relax, and enlightenment comes. And then you wonder why you couldn't hear him all along. That was the long and short of it.

Let's go back to E.E. Cummings. He baffled a lot of people. Baffles some still, but not as much as he used to. Cummings plays with words so, plays with caps and lower-case letters and the line. Creeley was using the truncated line in much of his work, and I just couldn't hear him because there was some interference between my eye and my ear and the page and my understanding. And it took students convincing me that they could hear him, and that I should, that he was great, to allow me to reach the point where I could ease up enough so that I could suddenly hear. I was trying too hard. Then later we got to Olsen, who explains it well.

### **Are you not a poet who needs to be heard rather than just read on the page?**

In a sense, but I don't really see anything complex about my poetry. Some people think it's terribly complex. But I think that hearing it is a bridge over those waters. But, you know, the first time I met Ezra Pound's daughter, Mary deRachewiltz, who has been to St. Andrews dozens of times, was at the airport in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I had been an admirer of Pound's since I was 19, but I am not a linguist, and I had always felt a little guilty, a little bit of a charlatan in my advocacy of Pound's work. But I finally arrived at the point where I've been ever since. Even if I like somebody, if we're not going to be friends I'd like to know it from the outset, rather than have it come as a surprise to either of us. So I said to Mary as we were driving from Fayetteville to Laurinburg that I wasn't a linguist and that there were a lot of historical facts in *The Cantos* which eluded me, but that I'd always read them aloud or heard them at least, even if I read them silently; I read them through my ear. I told her that they meant a lot to me, and if this was charlatanism, then make the most of it. I really wanted to confess my weaknesses.

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She replied that that was exactly the way Ezra wanted them read, and that when he used foreign languages he used them as much for the music as anything else—to create a complete musical fabric. So I breathed a great shuddering sigh of relief.

Of course, T.S. Eliot, having been sort of a creature of Pound's creation, has also suffered from too many people worrying about their not being 100 percent intellectually in tune with what he's saying in his poems. They forget the fact that it's all there. I mean, my God, who is more irritating than the person who sits in front of you at the San Francisco Symphony reading the score and rattling the sheets while the orchestra's playing?

### **What else, Ron?**

Well, I'd like to get back to the mysticism aspect of things. This is a subject I've never mentioned publicly before—and seldom, indeed, in private. But back to Charles Olson: I was 34 or 35, and I was truly in the depths of despair. I was feeling so desperate that nothing was viable or tenable, nothing made sense. It was the only time in my life that I tried to deep-six. Oddly enough, it didn't work, I'm very happy to say. I wrote to Charles Olson the next day, and I said that one thing I'd been clinging to as something that made sense out of life was "a poem I heard you read in Vancouver in 1963, and I'm missing one word." I sent that off from Okinawa to Charles in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

I had been to his house. He was a nocturnal creature. I had passed by in the daytime, but he was so formidable that I didn't knock to wake him up. He had this old house right down by the harbor, and he was known sometimes to not bother with his mail for weeks at a time.

Anyway, I was in this very delicate balance emotionally and mentally, and by return mail, within a week—which is almost mystical when you think of the good ol' U.S. mail—I had back from him a handwritten poem called "The Port Of." It's a four-line poem in iambic pentameter. When George Butterick visited my house several years ago, he said, "Please will that poem to the Olson Archives, because it's the only copy which exists in that exact form." So I had that from Olson in the mail in a week back in Okinawa—when I really needed it.